THE RATIONALITY OF HABITUAL ACTIONS[1]

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We are creatures of habit. Familiar ways of doing things in familiar contexts become automatic for us. That is to say, when we acquire a habit we can act without thinking about it at all. Habits free our minds to think about other things. Without this capacity for habitual action our daily lives would be impossible. Our minds would be crowded with innumerable mundane considerations and decisions. Habitual actions are not always mundane. Aristotle famously said that acting morally is a matter of exercising the right habits.[2] For him, a lack of conscious thought is no bar on an action's moral status. Habits are involved in our most prized activities. Of course our natural capacity for acquiring habits is sometimes a nuisance, and we acquire bad habits all too easily. But we nevertheless could not do without a vast array of habits which are not like this, and we can't help but exercise them in our daily lives. It does not seem too strong to say that we spend much more of our time acting habitually than we do acting in the light of conscious thought.

We are also rational creatures. It is because of our rationality that we naturally think that most human actions are different in kind from the behaviour of other animals. This difference is manifest in the fact that we hold rational creatures personally responsible for what they do, in ways that would make no sense for non-rational creatures. Our rationality, then, appears to give our actions a unique quality.

Considering how commonplace both habitual and rational actions seem to be it is surprising to find that these two features of actions are rarely considered at the same time. When they are, habits tend to be given short shrift. Though it is rare that habitual actions are actually taken to be *ir*rational, most have no problem with assigning them non-rational status.[3] I think this is a mistake. This is not just because, as a sympathiser with virtue theory, I want moral actions to be both habitual and

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[1] This paper was given at the University of Bergen, Norway in 2001 and is published in *Proceedings of the Durham-Bergen Postgraduate Philosophy Seminar*, 1, University of Durham and University of Bergen, 2005, pp. 39-50.

[2] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2.

[3] The distinction between non-rational and irrational actions will be questioned later.

rational. But more generally, and independent of views on morality, if I am right that most of our actions are habitual, it turns out that most of the actions of rational creatures are not rational at all. This is, to say the least, counter-intuitive. Our understanding of the concept of a rational agent dictates that most of the actions of rational agents are rational, and this serves as a constraint on accounts of rational action. I call it the *conceptual constraint*. The violation of this constraint should raise our suspicions that there is theoretical skulduggery afoot.

In this paper I want to track down one such piece of skulduggery which we find in the thicket of contemporary action theory. In that thicket, whilst there is dissent on many matters, agreement upon one point is striking. When we ask what it means for a particular action to count as rational, we hear a single reply. All and only rational actions are done *for reasons* (or "in the light of reasons", as it is now often expressed). This view has the status of a platitude. But I think it should be treated as a substantive claim, and a controversial one at that. I call it *the reasons theory of rational action*.[4] It is this theory that the phenomenon of habitual action gives us reason to doubt.

In the first three sections of this paper I shall argue that if we hold the reasons theory of rational action, fulfilling the conceptual constraint leads us to a form of intellectualism, that is, the unwarranted privileging of our capacity to reason. In §1 I say more about the reasons theory, and how it requires reasons to be subconscious. In §2 I question a common assumption about how our explanatory capacities support the idea of such reasons. In §3 I press home the intellectualism charge. Finally in §4 I suggest that all is not lost by outlining a possible alternative to the reasons theory, what I call the *permissive conception of rationality*. This conception of rationality allows us to count most habitual actions as rational, and hence to meet the conceptual constraint. And it does this whilst avoiding intellectualism.

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[4] Though views about what reasons are differ greatly, I mean to capture them all in the net of the reasons theory. Specifically I intend the reasons theory to be compatible with two strikingly opposed views known respectively as *reasons internalism* and *reasons externalism*. Roughly, reasons internalists such as Davidson (1980) and Smith (1994) think that reasons are psychological states of the agent, whilst reasons externalists such as Collins (1998), Stout (1996) and Dancy (2000) think that reasons are states, or possible states, of the world. Notwithstanding the many points of disagreement between (and within) these schools of thought, all agree that reasons alone are what make an action rational.

1. The Reasons Theory

I want to give a fuller picture of the reasons theory of rational action by showing how it meets two constraints on accounts of rational action in general. We have already seen one such constraint, the conceptual constraint, which states that an account of rational action cannot result in the minority of our actions turning out to be rational. I shall describe the second constraint before showing how the reasons theory can be said to meet them.

An account of rational action must make clear the peculiarity of this kind of action. This may seem to trivially state that an account of x must show how x is different from y, z and so on. But I want to give the constraint a little more substance. Specifically a viable account of rational action must clearly distinguish the actions of agents from the kinds of behaviour that non-rational creatures go in for. An account of rational action which does not explicate this difference is to that extent inadequate. Call this the distinctiveness constraint.[5]

Given these two constraints we can now ask how the reasons theory of rational action meets them. So far we have the following:

(RT) An action is rational if and only if the agent does it for reasons.

The idea of a reason is used in a technical sense. Reasons must, as Davidson (1980) first said, *rationalize* the action. They must say what the agent finds attractive about performing the action. So there may be many things that speak in favour of performing a given action, but many of them might leave the agent cold. It is what she actually finds attractive about the action at the time of acting, that is the reason for her action. This is *her* reason. This scheme also allows us to make sense of the common case when somebody finds more than one thing compelling about a given action. Here we say that a number of reasons rationalize her action. This notion of a reason is well

[5] We don't want to make this divide too great, as we want to be able to see ourselves as having evolved out of that natural world. Minimally, then, the difference in kind must be explicable without recourse to mysterious or super-natural jumps. This would provide a further "naturalistic" constraint on accounts of rational action, but naturalism is not my concern here.

embedded in the literature, and we don't need to agree with very much of what Davidson says to accept its intuitive appeal.[6]

The reasons theory meets the distinctiveness constraint. What is distinctive about rational actions is that they are done for reasons. It is not too difficult to see why this rules out cow and billiard ball behaviour from the class of rational actions. Cows and billiard balls, I suppose, are not the right sorts of things to have reasons.

The reasons theory of rational action would hardly be compelling at all, however, if we did not accept one important qualification. More often than not, we act without any conscious awareness of what is attractive about what we do. We don't particularly need to be reminded of the special case of habitual actions in order to see this. Just why we are performing some action hardly ever goes through our minds when we are performing it. For instance, we might have made a plan about what to do, and this action may be a part of carrying the plan out. Any number of considerations could have been before our minds at the planning stage, but we will hardly ever retain these thoughts when we come to execute the plan. Of course this is not to say that we are never aware of the attractiveness of an action when we perform it – typically this will happen when we are not sure about whether to do something or not, and decide on reflection to do it – but these kinds of action are relatively few and far between. As a result of the phenomenology of apparently rational action, then, the reasons theorist should not deem it necessary for reasons to be within the agent's consciousness at the time of acting. If this were a requirement it would turn out that hardly any of our actions are rational, and that would violate the conceptual constraint.

For the reasons theory to have credible scope, then, we are (usually implicitly) asked by holders of the theory, to accept that for all rational actions for which we are not aware of the reasons at the time of acting, reasons are nevertheless present. They cannot be completely external to the agent's subjectivity or the reasons theorist would lose the sought distinction between actions and mere behaviour. So reasons must be, in some sense, *subconscious*. Unless reasons of this kind existed, the reasons theorist would not be entitled to call non-deliberated actions rational at all.

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[6] Specifically we need not accept that reasons can always be restated in terms of a pro attitude plus a means-end belief.

2. The Capacity to Explain Oneself

At this point the reasons theorist will not be too worried about having posited a notion of a reason which could be subconscious. Solid pre-theoretical support of the existence of such reasons apparently comes from the agent's capacity to explain herself. I take it that the thought is this. As long as after acting, the agent is in a position to explain what she took to speak in favour of the action, either to herself or somebody else, or would at least accept some such explanation were it offered, then this is evidence for the prior presence of the subconscious reasons. But there are two reasons why I think that we should reject this reasoning.

First, there is room to doubt that we have this self-explanatory capacity for all kinds of action, habitual actions being a case in point. Is it really the case that whenever I exercise a habit that I find it attractive or "worth doing" in any sense? Some habits I might like exercising because in so doing I obtain some desired end. I exercise my habit of rowing for health and enjoyment. But many habits are not like this. Think of idiosyncratic habits like fiddling with one's glasses in seminars. It seems plausible that there are instances of such actions when one will have nothing much to say except that "I did it out of habit", and that need not entail that it was attractive to one in any way. I could be utterly indifferent to it. Of course I might be cajoled into accepting some explanation which shows that I did after all find some habitual action attractive - say, that I really did want to do fiddle with my glasses because it makes me feel comfortable (our ingenuity in such quests can seem limitless) - but the cajoling would be to the point, because it shows the data has been rigged. Certainly not as pre-theoretical as we had hoped. So we should be wary of accepting the assumption that we can always say what we found attractive about past acts.[7]

But even if we could be sure that self-explanations were available for habitual actions which could count as reasons, there is a second, more general problem. For our capacity to explain ourselves seems to be insufficient evidence for the prior presence of

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[7] Davidson or his followers, might at this point try to deny that any supposed "action" in favour of which the agent could say nothing thereby forfeits its right to be termed an action. Not only would this move show that the Davidsonian's chances of meeting the conceptual constraint would be slim, but in the current context the move would be question-begging, for it presupposes the truth of the reasons theory which is at issue.

the putative subconscious reasons. Of course, when an agent has deliberated, her recollections of those deliberations may well form the basis of her later explanation, and any explanation which purports to be complete would surely require this information. But when no conscious deliberation has taken place, one's capacity to explain oneself, or to accept some explanation, need not always be understood as the bringing to consciousness of previously subconscious workings. Explanation of ones actions can be a far more speculative and creative process than that.

For instance, if pressed for an explanation of a particular action I may concede that I all along wanted what it led to, but this does not show that I had such a want at the time of acting, as it were, pushing me out of my apathy. Rather, my accepting the explanation can be seen as one of many plausible lines of reasoning that would cohere reasonably well with my overall view of the world at the time I acted, and thereby sheds some light on what I was doing. But such light may only be shed at this point of explanation, and it might illuminate me the actor just as much as my questioner. There is still no conclusive evidence that any light whatever was shed at an earlier point. What is more, it is at least controversial that agents are always authoritative about a supposedly "true" reflection of their motives. Close friends and intimates will sometimes be much better placed to offer a decent explanation of a given action than the agent herself. For these reasons it appears that an agent's capacity to explain herself could be accounted for without reference to prior subconscious deliberations, and should not be assumed to be evidence for them. As a result, I think we should be suspicious of these alleged murky goings on.

3. Intellectualism

In this section I shall argue that in the attempt to meet the constraints on theories of rational action, the reasons theorist may commit one form of intellectualism, and certainly commits another.

A first kind of intellectualist charge will be familiar from contemporary debate in the philosophy of mind. Wittgenstein was highly critical of the idea of "inner" mental items which were supposed to explain manifest phenomena. Some will be tempted to give the idea of a reason metaphysical underpinning in the form of

psychological states which can exist independently of our consciousness of them.[8] Those with Humean leanings typically do this. But in so doing the Wittgensteinian complaints can be made.[9] However, not all reasons theorists are guilty of this kind of intellectualism. Those who take the view that reasons are states, or possible states, of the world, are arguably clear of this charge.[10] However, even these writers do not avoid a second kind of intellectualism.

This more pervasive intellectualism is the unjustified assumption that all rational actions are to be modelled upon those actions upon which we deliberate. The assumption is that even when we don't think about what to do, we still act *as if* we think about it, and hence, our theory need not be sensitive to the distinction. Intellectualism is revealed in the collapsing of the distinction between deliberation proper and as-if deliberation.[11]

As-if deliberation should not be confused with the real thing. As we have seen, the distinction is supported by the phenomenology of action. And it remains theoretically possible that many of the actions that we would naturally call "rational" are done without any reasons at all being present to the agent at the time of acting. We commonly act, to parody the popular phrase, in the *dark* of reasons. Habitual actions are a case in point where it looks entirely plausible that no reasons are present to the agent, yet acting habitually is still often a sensible, indeed rational, thing to do. Ignoring the distinction between deliberated and as-if deliberated action distorts the phenomenon of rational action.

Of course some will reply that collapsing the distinction is justified because it is only by doing this there is any hope of a unified theory of rational action. After all, alternatives which do not assume the correctness of the reasons theory are conspicuous by their absence. But this kind of reply will, I hope, begin to sound hollow by the end of the paper.

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[8] This is the position I referred to as reasons internalism in n. 4.

[9] As can a number of others. See Stout (1996), Chapter 1.

[10] These are the reasons externalists mentioned in n. 4.

[11] Two reasons externalists who clearly assume that intellectual activity is pervasive are Stout and Dancy. Stout (1996) claims that action essentially involves the subject in a "practical justification". Dancy (2001) characterises a motivating reason as that which "persuaded" an agent to act (p. 1).

If this intellectualist complaint is right, we have three options:

1. Adopt a theory of subconscious reasons which is not intellectualist.

2. Do not try to meet the conceptual constraint, and accept the counter-intuitive result that most of the time rational agents do not act rationally.

3. Revise, or abandon, the reasons theory of rational action.

I do not think that 1 is promising. I can't think of any justification for positing subconscious reasons in cases of habitual action, other than to save their status as rational. But that is no justification at all, because it begs the question at issue.

I also doubt that that option 2, dropping the conceptual constraint, is a promising way forward. We may of course sometimes have to accept counter-intuitive results in philosophy, particularly if the argumentation leading to them is compelling. However, I am not convinced that we as yet have such argumentation. And as we shall soon see, there may be other ways in which the conceptual constraint can be met.

The possibility I want to pursue is the third.

4. Permissive Rationality

The radical solution I want to assess is that we drop the reasons theory of rational action altogether, and replace it with an alternative. I think it could turn out that the alternative meets both the distinctiveness constraint and the conceptual constraint, and does so without being intellectualist.

I suggested earlier that the reasons theory of rational action is not platitudinous. I can now say why. The reasons theorist assumes that all rational actions have something in common which make them rational. The agent's reasons are, if you will, the *rationality-makers*. But Wittgenstein (1953, §§55-66) taught us years ago that there are many kinds of concepts which work perfectly well despite the fact that the items to which such a concept applies share nothing save being of that kind. To use the hackneyed example, if we want to characterise the concept of a "game", a search for a feature shared by all games will be in vain. In her attempt to characterise rational action, the reasons theorist has done just this. But as for games, so for rational action. Perhaps rational actions share nothing except their being rational actions. Of course to some, rejecting the assumption that rational actions share a common feature may seem to leave us without any kind of account of the concept, and giving up on

analysis altogether. But the idea of rational action can still be captured by giving a negative characterisation.

To see how this could work I want to describe a different concept which can be accurately characterised negatively. The concept is that of legality, as it operates in Britain.[12] The idea of a legal action can be characterised negatively:

(PL) An action is legal if and only if it is not illegal.

So to establish whether a given action is legal or not, we need to ask if it violates any law, at which point we might consult the relevant institutions, statute books and so forth. If we find that the action violates no law, it counts as legal. Note that it does not matter to us that there is no mention of the action, or kind of action, in question in the statute books. If we ask whether building model aeroplanes is legal, we shall be satisfied that it is if we find no mention of such activities in the statute books. We can be absolutely confident of the legal status of the action without needing anything explicit to make it so. It does not worry us that the institutions have yet to tell us what feature all legal actions share which makes them legal. I shall call concepts which work in this way *permissive* concepts. Legality is a permissive concept.[13]

Given the familiarity of the concept of legality it may seem surprising that, with few exceptions, philosophers do not take seriously the possibility that rationality might be a permissive concept too.[14] The suggestion then is this:

(PR) An action is rational if and only if it is not irrational.

The permissive conception obliterates the commonly used three-way distinction between actions which are rational, irrational and non-rational respectively.[15] Because

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[12] According to Van Fraassen (unpublished), Prussian law operates in a quite different way.

[13] Other candidate permissive concepts include healthy (not ill); normal (not abnormal); adequate (not inadequate).

[14] I have found two exceptions. Bernard Gert (1998) writes "Defining a rational action simply as an action that is not irrational does not impose a fictitious and misleading uniformity on all rational actions" (p. 61). I do not follow Gert's, I think highly contentious, characterisation of irrationality. Van Fraassen (unpublished) notices the contrast between these two possible approaches to rationality, but does not develop the implications for accounts of rational action.

[15] A distinction which was uncritically accepted in the introduction to this paper.

legality and rationality are permissive concepts, the category of non-rational actions makes no more sense than the category of the non-legal actions. What action could be non-legal without also being illegal? Similarly, if the term "non-rational" has any application it is not to mark out some third category of actions distinct from the irrational ones.[16] Habitual actions, then, cannot turn out to be non-rational, as many currently think.

What is more, permissive rationality promises not only to allow us to count many of the actions upon which agents have deliberated as rational, but also to include under that heading habitual actions, and all others over which no prior deliberation has taken place. The real pay-off of this conception of rationality is that it saves us from looking for a rationality-maker, as the reasons theorist does. As a result, we are freed from the need to model rational actions on deliberated actions, which left us open to the charge of intellectualism.

The viability of permissive rationality depends upon our having a clear grasp of irrational action. Fortunately, because we encounter irrationality in our everyday lives, we seem to have a rather good grasp on this. What is more, philosophers have done rather well at distinguishing different kinds of irrationality. Consider the following sample of ways to be irrational: actions for which no good justification can be given; actions that result from invalid reasoning; actions which result from a failure to reason when reasoning is demanded; weak-willed actions; self-deceiving actions; actions which manifest wishful thinking; self-harming actions. If we adopt a permissive conception of rationality, the philosophical task of distinguishing and clarifying different kinds of irrationality takes on a new urgency. But we do not need such clarifications to be satisfied that we have a reasonable pre-theoretic grasp on the irrational. We all have a good idea of what to look for if we suspect somebody of self-deceit, or being weak-willed, whether or not philosophically informed. That we have such a grasp should be sufficient for the credibility of permissive rationality.

We can now see how some habitual actions will count as rational, whilst others will not. If I habitually poke myself in the eye, the pokings are straightforwardly irrational on the grounds that it inflicts self-harm. My exercising a bad habit like nail-

[16] Of course the term "non-rational" could be helpfully employed to pick out those behaviours which are not apt for assessments of rationality at all, such as the heartbeat, and the movements of billiard balls.

biting could count as irrational on the same ground, and it might also be irrational by dint of my not wanting to have the habit any more. In continuing to bite my nails I fail to act as my reason dictates, and thus exhibit a kind of weakness of will.

In contrast, consider a habit which is not bad, that is, one whose normal exercise meets no standard of irrationality. For instance, my habitually going the same way to work each day is rational on a permissive conception because in so doing I am not manifesting any kind of irrationality. This does not mean that exercising this habit will always be rational. Consider the day when my usual route is blocked by road-works. In such a case I would be doing something irrational were I to learn of the road-works, and nonetheless insist on exercising my habit. The irrationality in this case would be a failure to decide to do otherwise (perhaps to pursue a different route), when such a decision is manifestly required in novel circumstances. But this does nothing to harm the claim that in normal circumstances, exercising the habit is rational.

As I suggested at the outset I think that we have huge numbers of habits that are not bad in this way - think of the habits of word and sentence use, the habits of social interaction, habits exercised in sporting contexts, and so forth. It seems reasonable to think that such habits outnumber bad habits by orders of magnitude. When agents exercise these habits in normal contexts we don't need to contrive some favourable light which they are supposed to have seen at the point of acting, to license our calling them "rational". That they are actions that lack irrationality is enough. If we must have an explanation it might be enough to say that the agent has such-and-such a habit, and she's now exercising it. Admittedly this doesn't tell us very much, and it tells us nothing about rationality. But better that than some contorted invention tailored to suit a problematic theory, but with little else to recommend it.[17]

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[17] Permissive rationality leaves open the intriguing possibility that some actions for reasons - understood as conscious reasons - could turn out to be irrational. I might mull over a number of considerations which speak in favour of some action before plumping for it, but the action could count as irrational on a number of counts. I could for instance consider the fact that I like to feel pain, and decide to inflict some harm on myself. According to the reasons theory (thus restricted) this action would count as rational, whereas on a permissive conception this would be an irrational action. Another weakness in the reasons theory, then, is that no limits are placed on the *contents* of reasons. (We find Davidson, for example, allowing that somebody's yen to drink a can of paint could be rational (1980, p. 4)). But because our understanding of

A question remains. If we adopt permissive rationality as our preferred account, are the two constraints on our account of rational action satisfied? I will finish by briefly sketching why I think the answer is yes.

It is open to us to say that the distinctiveness of rational action is secured not because some faculty of reason is brought into play every time we act, but rather because such a faculty *could* be brought into play, were it required in a particular case. Rational creatures do not obsessively exercise their reason every time they act, but rather can judge when reasoning is required, and when it is not. So we can say that it is the *presence* of the faculty of reason, so that it could be employed, and not its actual employment, which licenses the assessment of particular actions as rational or irrational. In contrast, cows and billiard balls do not have a faculty of reason, nor the capacity to judge when to use it. Accordingly, their behaviours are not subject to assessments of rationality. Thus the distinctiveness constraint is met.

What about the conceptual constraint? I suggested at the beginning of this paper that habitual actions are the most common kind of human action. We have now seen that if we adopt a permissive conception of rationality, it follows that exercises of most of our habits (the ones that aren't bad), when exercised in their normal circumstances, turn out to be rational. Of course some habits will be bad, and some circumstances will not be normal, so we might still lack confidence that the conceptual constraint is met.

But we can say something else about abnormal circumstances. For in abnormal circumstances, that is, circumstances in which there is no habituated response, we tend to think before we act, that is, to exercise our reason. And here we can take a lesson from the reasons theorists, because they have always maintained that exercising our reason is a good way of avoiding irrationality (their mistake was to think that this is the only way). So in normal and abnormal circumstances alike, we tend to act rationally. And now we seem very close to the conclusion that the majority of the actions of rational creatures are rational, if not all the way there. That is, after all, what one would expect.

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irrationality covers actions with particular kinds of bad end, permissive rationality automatically excludes these bad actions from being rational, whatever the agent's thoughts. This would seem to be another advantage of permissive rationality.

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